



SUPERMAN

TO THE RESCUE!

TMS & © DC Comics Inc. 1978

By Jack Kroll

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's... aaahhh, shaddapp already, we know, we know, it's **SUPERMAN**. But what on earth—or Krypton—is the Man of Steel, first spied soaring over a Depression-ridden America in 1938, doing aloft in the skies over the World Trade Center 40 years later? Well, a superguy has got to make a superbuck, doesn't he?

The new, \$35 million movie, more than four years in the making, hopes to join such recent extravaganzas as "Star Wars" and "Jaws" as a nine-figure moneymaker after its initial release two weeks ago in 700 movie houses in the U.S. and abroad. In Washington, D.C., President Carter took Amy to see it at a gala Presidential premiere. In London, Queen Elizabeth II took Prince Andrew to see it at a gala

royal premiere. And despite mixed reviews, ranging from raves to snorts, "Superman" after one week has become the biggest one-week grosser in the history of Warner Bros. and has made Christopher Reeve the fastest-risen new star since... umm... John Travolta.

Moreover, "Superman" turns out to be a surprisingly infectious entertainment, nicely balanced between warmth and wit, intimacy and impressive special effects, comic-strip fantasy and several elements that make the movie eminently

eligible for Deep Thinking about rescue fantasies, cherubic messiahs and other pieces of popcorn metaphysics. Director Richard Donner ("The Omen") deserves credit for catalyzing the work of several writers—Mario Puzo, Robert Benton, David and Leslie Newman, Tom Mankiewicz and others—to create a mass entertainment of high class and energy.

"Superman" is in fact three movies—or more—each with its own style, look and rhythm. This has already displeased some observers who demand the Aristotelian unities with their Crackerjack, but it creates a compelling shimmer of echoes and textures; it makes the film much more fun to watch.

Donner begins on the planet Krypton, envisioned by production designer John Barry as a sphere of crystal structures, like a planet-size perfume bottle flashing through

space. We see Jor-El, a Kryptonian biggie (Marlon Brando), first prosecuting a trio of Nazi-like revolutionaries and then trying to convince Krypton's council that the old crystal homestead is about to be shivered to smithereens by cosmic forces. Before the planet explodes, Jor-El and his wife, Lara (Susannah York), send their baby Kal-El to Earth in a starship, a kind of space-borne crystal bassinets that transmits all the learning of the universe to the infant as he whooshes through the galaxies.

Geoffrey Unsworth, the master British cinematographer, died shortly after completing this film. His work brings home the force of that old British designation on film credits: lighting cameraman. Unsworth sweeps and stains the screen with light. The vitreous glow of the Krypton sequence is suc-

ceeded by the panoramic sweep of Kansas farm country, where the starship lands. The hefty, smiling baby who emerges is plucked from the impact's crater by Glenn Ford and Phyllis Thaxter as a farm couple named Kent. They know they've made an unusual find when the supertyke lifts up Pa Kent's truck so he can change a tire. Young Clark Kent (Jeff East) is raised in a mid-American ambience, a blend of Andrew Wyeth and Norman Rockwell. When his earthling foster father dies, the 18-year-old is drawn to the North Pole, where a sort of Kryptonian crystal computer breaks through the ice and a holographic image of his father, Jor-El, sends him spinning back through space for twelve years of postgraduate supereducation.

The final section of Donner's pop triptych takes us of course to Metropolis—a practically undisguised New York City—

where the now 30-year-old Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) arrives in his chosen persona as the mild-mannered young reporter to join the staff of the Daily Planet. This section is designed in a fine confection of pure comic-strip hues, shapes and masses as Kent establishes his relations with all the legendary regulars from the strip created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster: spunky sob sister Lois Lane (Margot Kidder), hard-driving editor Perry White (Jackie Cooper), kid photographer Jimmy Olsen (Mark McClure) and eventually the archfiend of the Superman strip, Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman) and his cohorts the arch-idiot Otis (Ned Beatty) and the arch-cheesecake Miss Teschmacher (Valerie Perrine).

The Metropolis sequences explode in a stylish and shrapnel-swift burst of action. In his first night in town, the caped wonder plucks Lois from midair as she's



Superbaby in Krypton (with York, Brando)



Supertyke in the Midwest (with



Thaxter and Ford), Superman on a date with Lois Lane and the Man of Steel saving a train





ATTENDANTS, UNAWARE THE CHILD'S PHYSICAL STRUCTURE WAS MILLIONS OF YEARS ADVANCED OF THEIR OWN, WERE ASTOUNDED AT HIS FEATS OF STRENGTH



FIGHT... YOU WEAK-LIVERED POLE-CAT!
REALLY—I HAVE NO DESIRE TO DO SO!



BEARING LOIS IN HIS ARMS SUPERMAN HEADS TOWARD THE CITY —



© DC Comics Inc. 1938; reprinted 1965

Superman in his 1938 comic-book debut: Out of the Depression comes Earth's savior—and a favorite American myth

falling from a helicopter that's crashed on the Daily Planet roof, saves the President of the U.S. by replacing a damaged engine on Air Force One with his own body, walks perpendicularly down the glass wall of a skyscraper to capture a human-fly bandit, rounds up a fleeing boatload of heisters and climaxes the evening's activities by rescuing a little girl's pussycat from a tree. This sequence is a classic barrage of high-energy movie-making, done with a bounce that sweeps up a lot of humor and some splendid special effects, especially the helicopter

rescue, which is a veritable anthology of wizardry filmed and edited with a casual, jolting drive.

Although "Superman" has flaws of pace, structure and concept, Donner's shaping of the film amounts in its way to a major feat of filmmaking. Intelligently, he doesn't try to work against the inherent absurdity of a phenomenon like Superman: he works with it, extending and interweaving its own rhythms into a larger space for the eye and even the mind.

Originally, "Superman's" cabal of producers—Alexander Salkind, his son Ilya and Pierre Spengler—had planned a medium-budget spectacle along the lines of the James Bond movies and hired Bond director Guy Hamilton to direct in Rome and Mario Puzo to write the screenplay. "When Puzo came to the very first meeting," says Ilya Salkind, "he said, 'My God, I think I want to handle this as a Greek tragedy.'" There, of course, spoke the creator of "The Godfather," and in

fact Puzo's first-draft screenplay was, says Salkind, "very heavy." To lighten the burden, the producers turned to the team of Robert Benton and David Newman, who in the mid-'60s had written a Broadway musical based on the comic strip. Their revision of Puzo took the concept too far in the opposite direction.

Obviously, we didn't want to lose the framework of the comic book," says Richard Donner, "but I didn't want to make a joke out of it—a parody. Benton and Newman put in things like Superman flying along looking for Lex Luthor and he passes a baldheaded man in the street, flies down to grab him, and it turns out to be Telly Savalas who says, 'Who loves ya, Baby?'" That sort of thing would have been disastrous, but Benton and Newman did make a major contribution to the comic feeling that Donner wanted in the script—with the help of Newman's wife, Leslie, who, replacing Benton after the first draft, used her own mixture of spunkiness and vulnerability as something of a model for Lois Lane. "It seems to me," says Benton, "that the choice was never to make fun of Superman or the material. One of the things that always fascinated us was the love story, which could have been like a terrific Lubitsch film—a love trian-



Archvillain Hackman: Caricature of evil

gle in which two people are the same person." The Lubitsch reference underscores the most appealing quality of "Superman," which is, of all things, its charm. In his witty analysis of the Superman strip in "The Great Comic Book Heroes," Jules Feiffer saw the love situation not as a triangle but as "a schizoid and chaste ménage à trois." Wrote Feiffer: "Kent want-

ed Lois, Superman didn't—thus marking the difference between a sissy and a man. A sissy wanted girls who scorned him; a man scorned girls who wanted him." One of the charms of Donner's movie is the way in which it de-schizifies and (gently) un-chastes this ménage à trois. Reeve's Clark Kent is a bumbling fumbler, but he's no sissy. And his Superman is not a man—he is precisely a super-man, a situation that more and more becomes a pain in the cape to him as he realizes that he loves Lois.

But what does a poor superslob from Krypton with a dense molecular structure do when he wants to make it with an Earth-girl with fluffy molecules? Well, he takes her flying for a start. At their best, the highly touted flying scenes in "Superman" have a lyrical beauty. When Reeve takes Margot Kidder for a flight high above the towers and bridges of Metropolis/New York, the sexual metaphor of this dream-flight glides buoyantly on the screen with a real sweetness.

This episode ends with the single most brilliant scene in the entire film. Reeve as Superman deposits Lois gently back on her terrace after their maiden flight, so to speak. He says good night to her and leaps up off the terrace again to disappear in the sky they've just shared. Without a cut, the camera follows Lois as she moves love-drunk into her apartment, and a moment later there's a knock at her door and Reeve as Clark Kent, horn-rimmed glasses, dull business suit and all, comes in to remind her they had a date. The scene is a splendid technical trick, but the point is that Donner decided to shoot it like this when he could have done it easily with a cut or two. This is the real magic of the movies—the virtuosity of the scene reinforces the sweetness and the humor of the love for Lois felt by two men who are really one man. It's a scene that deserves applause.

Christopher Reeve's entire performance is a delight. Ridiculously good-looking, with a face as sharp and strong as an ax blade, his bumbling, fumbling Clark Kent and omnipotent Superman are simply two styles of gallantry and innocence. And Margot Kidder as Lois is adorable, an amusing takeoff on hotshot journalism as she types out her stories of the day's characteristic events, misspelling key words like "massacre," "rapist" and "brasiere." She is funny, raunchy and tender in the interview scene with Superman, her face immobilized with boggled adoration as she asks him, with timed pauses that Harold Pinter would envy: "How big are you . . . tall are you? . . . Do you . . . eat?"

Oddly enough, the major discrepancy in the film's deft mosaic is the subplot of master criminal Lex Luthor, who hatches master crimes from his lair 200 feet be-

SUPER STAR



Is there life after Superman for Christopher Reeve? He's a super-serious actor; he worked incredibly hard on the film; he's looking forward to finishing "Superman II," and then one suspects he hopes he never sees a red cape for the rest of his life. "Listen, I knocked myself out to try to make Superman come alive today in the '70s. But I hope people understand that I'm passing through, you know what I mean? People say, 'Are you Superman?' I say no, but I got his phone number. I'm his mouthpiece today, that's all."

At first, big-name actors including Robert Redford, Warren Beatty and Charles Bronson were considered for the lead. Producer Ilya Salkind's wife's dentist was even screen-tested. Director Richard Donner thought that Christopher Reeve was too young and skinny, but he went into intensive training with David Prowse (Darth Vader of "Star Wars") and emerged with a super-physique on his 6-foot 4-inch frame. He also worked out on the trampoline

for his takeoffs and landings. Reeve brought to his flying the same sort of Clark Kentish seriousness that he brings to everything. "I'm a born flier," he says. "I've got ratings in airplanes, seaplanes and gliders. I felt that although Superman's flying is made possible by the technicians, more than that it's done in the eyes. You must see on this man's face a certain delight, a certain joy in the flying that can only come out of inner conviction."

The 26-year-old Reeve has had inner conviction for a long time. At 13 he decided to become an actor. His father is F. D. Reeve, a scholar, novelist and teacher of creative writing at Yale; his mother is a journalist, his stepfather a stockbroker. Reeve worked in summer stock every vacation in high school, majored in English and music theory at Cornell, came to New York and studied acting at the Juilliard School. He joined off-Broadway's topnotch Circle Reper-

tory Company and became well known as Ben Harper, a sleazy bigamist on the soap opera "Love of Life." He also appeared in "Gray Lady Down," a submarine movie "that turned out to be a disaster about a disaster."

Then he got the role of Katharine Hepburn's grandson in Enid Bagnold's Broadway play "A Matter of Gravity." "She used to say to me, 'Now be fascinating, Christopher, now be fascinating.' I said, 'Well, that's easy for you to say. The rest of us have to work at it, you know.'"

Work is something of a morality for Reeve. "If you look at pictures of me

when I was a kid I never cracked a smile. Really grim. Acting was a way to help me loosen up, expose myself, relax, and I think I've made some progress. But I also think it takes twenty years to make an actor. I'm halfway there."

Reeve, who got \$250,000 for "Superman," lives in an apartment on New York City's West Side. For a year, his girlfriend has been Gae Exton, a model's agent in London. He studies classical piano and he likes to travel around the world doing gliding competitions. He's also a professional sailor in his spare time. "I do yacht deliveries for people. The last guy I did lives in Toronto and wanted his boat down in Bermuda. I got together a crew of six and in return for air fares back and a couple of beers we delivered his boat. Six days and five nights . . . That's living to me." He adds: "If you're out 500 miles off the coast of South Carolina and you see a force-10 gale coming, you know what you must do to survive it. Show business is devious, people maneuver, people play games. But on the sea or in the air, it's clean and it's direct and it's simple."

—J.K.

Reeve with Hepburn in "A Matter of Gravity," body-builder Arnold Schwarzenegger and girlfriend Exton: "I'm a born flier"





Supermen of yore: Alyn (above) in the movie serial, Reeves on TV

low Park Avenue, an amusing, baroque reproduction of Grand Central Terminal. The concept is much too broad for the tone of this "Superman," although Hackman plays Lex's criminal megalomania with a heavy but stylish comedy beat. When Lex tells Superman about his plan to set off an earthquake with captured U.S. missiles at California's San Andreas Fault, Reeve asks, "Is that how a warped brain like yours gets its kicks, by planning the deaths of thousands of innocent people?" Hackman replies: "No, by causing the deaths of thousands of innocent people."

By caricaturing evil this way, Donner is probably trying to take the curse off the inescapable tilt of his movie toward myth and messianism. People can croak, "Entertainment! Entertainment!" until they're blue in the face. The fact remains that films like "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," "Superman" and even "Star Wars" have become jerry-built substitutes for the great myths and rituals of belief, hope and redemption that cultures used to shape before mass secular society took over.

Brando has become a beguilingly monstrous grotesque of fatherhood and authority in "The Godfather" and now as Jor-El. Although he's a bit like an intergalactic Liberace in his vanilla wig and fluorescent caftan, there's no mistaking the drift of his injunction to his child: "We shall explore various concepts of immortality . . . Earthlings can be a great people, they only lack the light. For this reason I've sent them you, my only son." Beyond even this clear reference to matters messianic, there's the remarkable climax of the movie in which poor Lois is killed, rather protractedly and horribly, when her car is crushed in Lex's earthquake. When Superman gets there a moment too late (he had promised to save



Photos by Moxie Star News

Miss Teschmacher's mother in Hackensack, N.J., first), a cry of cosmic rage breaks his supercool for the first time when he sees Lois dead—in fact, buried.

Leaping into the stratosphere, he is beset by conflicting voices from Jor-El, his father, reminding him he's not to interfere in human history, and from kindly old Mr. Kent, reminding him that "You were sent here for a reason." Supe whirls at extra-Einsteinian speed westward around the earth, turning its rotation backward to peel back time so that Lois will come back to life. When he lands beside her after her resurrection, his first word to her is "Hi." "That," says Donner, "is the most beautiful line to me in the whole film."

Superman as son of God, as the Saviour, as the Resurrection and the Life? Isn't that appallingly vulgar, a grisly reflection of the junk culture that has just about buried real culture almost out of sight? I don't believe it is. Why shouldn't these great revelatory myths come back into the collective consciousness in the most effective and dramatic ways that

our civilization, God help it, has set up?

One jarring note in the movie is the fact that Superman, after being fed the wisdom of the entire universe to prepare him for his mission on Earth, comes down here and cleans up on the petty crooks—gangsters, caper artists, muggers—but not on Lex Luthor, who for all his self-styled criminal genius only wants to blow up California so he can make some money out of real estate. Why doesn't Supe go after the big guys, who are the real danger in any society?

"Well," says Donner, "I could have put him into a political role. I could have annihilated everything Fascistic or Communistic or whatever in the world. But I thought, let's eliminate all the contemporary ills of our society and just make it the mugger or the cat burglar, but not the

philosophies or the problems of the world. Because God knows they would be the wrong answers to give; they wouldn't be real and that's a hell of a fantasy to give somebody."

Ironically, at the Washington, D.C., premiere, Donner and some of the actors were being interviewed by a crew from a German TV network. Their view of Superman was far from messianic. The interviewer told Gene Hackman, "The German people see Superman as a Fascist." Hackman laughed and said, "You must have seen another film. I don't see any of that at all." The interviewer said, "Don't you think the fact that Superman does not deal with the black question in the film . . ." Hackman bridled: "That's the most idiotic question I've ever heard, and you are an a---," and he stormed out of the room.

In their study, "Comics—Anatomy of a Mass Medium," Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs wrote about the American GI's who carried Superman around in their kits during World War II:

"He gave them hope and became their symbol of courage and determination, almost a substitute for conventional religion—to the horror of the Army chaplains."

Trying to balance this sort of thing with pure fun, Donner turned to "creative consultant" Tom Mankiewicz, son of producer-director Joe ("All About Eve"). Mankiewicz, with Donner, engineered a shift in tone between the campy elements of the Benton-Newman script toward "verisimilitude," a word he and Donner used often, even putting it up on signs in their offices. In the Benton-Newman script, for example, Lex Luthor was even more outrageous. "Luthor ate Kleenex," says Mankiewicz. "He had horrible animals in his lair—rats, snakes, alligators—that had been flushed down toilets in Metropolis. He would talk to them like children. It didn't fit the movie."

On the other hand, Mankiewicz put in some effective humor of his own, such as the scene in which Clark Kent, about to rescue Lois from the helicopter, looks for a phone booth to change into his Superman regalia, sees only the wide-open phone booths of 1978 and dismisses them with a frustrated gesture, running into a revolving door to make his change.

The revolving door is the mildest of special effects in a film full of dazzling ones. Colin Chilvers, ace British director of special effects, credits the technical crew with the work that made Chris Reeve fly. They used three basic techniques. A sophisticated system of wires plus a hydraulic system of tracks and pulleys went far beyond anything used by Mary Martin in "Peter Pan." There was also a pole-arm, a 14-foot boom that was attached to Reeve for sequences such as the love-ballet with Lois; a smaller version of the pole-arm, called a gimbal, was used for close-ups. For Lois's death in her car during the quake, Margot Kidder was strapped into a Ford sedan that was tilted on its side and placed in a specially constructed crushing machine that generated up to 60 tons of pressure on the car, while a load of dirt was poured over her head. "Not many actresses would let you tip that load on them," says Chilvers.

Chilvers's favorite effect is the scene in which Superman soars off the roof of the Daily Planet building after saving Lois and swoops through the air executing rolls and dives like a stunt pilot exhilarated by the sheer joy of flying.



Reeve was a huge asset in all of this. "Chris is tremendously coordinated," says John Barry, "much more so than the acrobats and stunt men we had. Plus, he has nerves of steel. At some points he was 200 feet off the ground in the bitter cold. I asked him if that bothered him and he said that after the first 50 feet it didn't make any difference to him, he stopped caring about it. That attitude never changed even though a couple of times he got closer to really flying than most people would want to get."

Less high than Reeve were Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, both 64, who created "Superman" 45 years ago. Because they signed a standard contract with the comic, they lost their copyright and became



Donner directing McClure, Cooper, Kidder, Reeve (as Clark Kent): This side of parody

strictly employees of the firm. After drifting into other jobs, both men developed medical problems and ran into hard times. Shuster became legally blind and took jobs in New York as a stock boy and messenger, Siegel, suffering from heart trouble, moved to California and ended up working in a Los Angeles post office. They never made a penny off the movie serial of "Superman" with Kirk Alyn or the 1950s TV series with George Reeves. They finally sued the company but were denied copyright renewal. But, pressured by sympathetic letters from around the world, Warner Communications (which had bought DC Comics) settled a lifetime annual income of \$20,000 apiece on Siegel and Shuster, plus medical benefits.

"The only sad thing," says Siegel, "is that Joe and I aren't getting anything from the movie. Joe and I just feel left out and forgotten. Our life has been very horrible. It does feel strange that there's

so much prosperity around "Superman" and Joe and I are just getting by." Shuster, however, has mixed reactions. "I'm very happy about the movie," says the gray-haired, bespectacled man who served as a model for the mild-mannered Clark Kent. "I'm delighted to see our creation on the screen. I got chills. Chris Reeve has just the right touch of humor. He really is Superman." And then Shuster adds, "But, because of all those years that have gone by . . ." and his voice trails off.

Ironically, a number of lawsuits have sprung up involving "Superman," most notably Marlon Brando's \$50 million suit claiming that the producers and Warners are doing him out of his share of gross receipts (he also got \$3.7

million for his role as Superman's father).

Despite all this, not only does "Superman" soar on but "Superman II" is already more than half shot. Apparently, in the sequel, the original threesome of Krypton villains come back to attack Earth, trash the White House, rough up E. G. Marshall (who plays the President), smash up Metropolis and end up running the whole world. More important, however, Superman will apparently relinquish his supermanhood, settling for human vulnerability and the love of Lois Lane. It's the apotheosis of the "heroism and innocence" which composer John Williams wrote into his brilliant, exciting score for "Superman." The de-supering of Superman is the ultimate paradox in the career of the Man of Steel, who finally prefers flesh and blood. No longer will he clear tall buildings at a single bound. It's a bird, it's a plane . . . hey, it's really a bird.